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1871-09-19

**Letter from John Muir to [Clinton L.] Merriam, 1871 Sep 19.**

John Muir

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Camp-fire 8 miles <sup>n</sup>North of  
Yosemite Falls, September 1871.

Dear Merriam.

*Nature*  
This has been a most glorious day, <sup>as</sup> full of beauty  
and joy as sun ever measured, one of God's own mountain  
units of time, nameless and dateless, big enough, and rich  
enough for a whole life.

Last evening I camped in a glacier meadow at the  
head of the Cascades' Eastmost tributary. The meadow was  
velvet with grass and compassed with a wall of Williamson ~~cedar~~ <sup>[cedar]</sup>  
spruce. I made a great fire and the daisies of the green  
sod rayed as if conscious of a sun. As I lay on my  
back in the silence, feeling the presence of the trees gleam-  
ing bright against the outer dark, all gushing with life and  
circling closer and closer about me, and saw the small round  
sky coming down with its stars and doming the <sup>l</sup>umined trees,  
I said, Never was mountain mansion more beautiful, more  
spiritual. Never was mortal wanderer more blessedly homed.  
The sun rose and my forest walls were removed -- the charmed  
trees returned to the common fund of the woods, and my  
sky flake fused back into the fathomless blue, and I was left  
upon common ground to pursue my daily glacier labor.

I followed the main Yosemite rim <sup>n</sup>Northward, passing  
round the head of the second Yosemite tributary which flowed  
about <sup>n</sup>North ~~East~~ until bent southward by the main current.

About noon I came to the basin of the third ice  
tributary of the <sup>w</sup>West rim, a place of domes which had long  
engaged my attention, and as I was anxious to study their

structure, and this little glacier which flowed from their midst, I camped here at the foot of the two most beautiful of the domes in a sheltered half-mile hollow, the womb of the glacier. At the foot of the two domes are two lakes, exactly alike in size and history, beautiful as any I ever beheld. First there is the pure glassy plantless water centre, then a light green fringe of *Carex* which has long arching leaves that dip to the water, then a beveled border of ~~yellow~~ <sup>yellow</sup> *Sphagnum* moss, coming ~~exactly~~ <sup>exactly</sup> to the water's edge, farther back is a narrow zone of dryer meadow, smooth with grasses which grow in soft plushy sods, interrupted here and there, by clumpy gatherings of blueberry bushes. The purple *Kalmia* has a place here also, and the splendidly flowered *Phyllodoce*, but these last are small, and weave into the sod, spreading low down in the grasses and living with them. Besides these flowering shrubs, the meadow has a small sprinkle of *Dodecatheon* and daisies and white violets, most pure and beautiful meadow zones, fitted divinely to the rim of most pure and beautiful lakes.

I spent most of the afternoon in following this tributary down to its junction with the main glacier, then turning to the right I crossed the mouths of the first two tributaries which I had passed in the morning, then bearing East examined a cross section of the main trunk and reached camp by following up the North bank of the tributary. Between the three tributaries which I have mentioned are well defined medial moraines, having been preserved from floods by their position on the higher slopes with but small



water-collecting basins behind them. Down at their bases where they were swept round to the South by the main trunk current, is a large leveled field of moraine matter, which like all the drift deposits of the basin is planted by heavy, ~~sunless~~ almost sunless forest, composed of the mountain pine (*Pinus monticola*) and the two leaved pine (*P. contorta*) and the two firs (*Picea amabilis* and *P. grandis*) the first of the silver firs and the two leaved pine predominating at this altitude, about 8500 ft above sea.----- This forest is now on fire. I wished to pass through it this afternoon but feared the falling trees. As I stood watching the flapping flames and estimating chances, a tall blazing pine crashed across the opening that I thought of passing, and in a few minutes later two others fell. This stirred half a thought concerning special providences and made me go around out of danger.

The two leaved pine is very susceptible of fire even when green, because it grows in close grove masses, and its smooth thin bark is beaded and trickled with gum. The summit forests are made up almost entirely of this pine.

Emerging from this wooded moraine, I found a great number of loose separate boulders lying upon a polished hill-top which had formed a part of the bottom of the main ice stream. Those boulders were of extraordinary size, some of them large as houses, and I started Northward to seek the mountain from which they had been torn. I had moved but a short distance when I observed a deer feeding in a strip of

green meadow a few yards ahead. The wind fanned unsteadily towards it, and I thought the opportunity a good one to see whether the deer's keenness of scent was not overtold by hunters. I stood perfectly still, and as it continued to feed tranquilly for some minutes, only shaking its great ears and throwing round its head at times to drive away the flies, I began to think that its nose was no better than my own, when suddenly it sprang into the air as if pierced by a bullet and ran off without looking round, but in a few seconds as if doubtful of the direction of the danger, it came bounding back, and catching a glimpse of me ran off a second time in a settled direction. The Yosemite basin is a favorite home of the deer. The *Leguminous* vines and juicy grasses of the great-outspread moraines furnish savory food, while the many high mountain hidings of the Hoffman range furnish abundant shelter.

Grizzly and brown bears also love Yosemite creek, the berries of the dwarf Manzanita, and acorns of the dwarf liveoak being very abundant upon the dry moraineless hilltops. These with some plants and the larvae of ants are the favorite food of the bear, varied occasionally by a stolen sheep or a shepherd. Higher in the range food is not abundant, and lower they are molested by man.

In returning to camp I examined three of the domes of the North bank and was struck with the exact similarity of their structure, the same concentric layers with a less perfectly developed perpendicular cleavage. This little glacier about two



and a half miles in length by one and a half in width must have been one of the most beautiful of the whole basin. All of its upper circling rim is adorned with domes, some of them broken and torn away on the sides by the ice, others nearly perfect from their superior strength or more favorable position and others appear only as low brows, half born, buried in the parent rock. The two lakes above described are the only ones of the basin, both domes and lakes are the handiwork of the glacier.

In the waning days of this mountain ice when the whole river began to shallow and break like a summer cloud, -- its crests and domes rising higher and higher, and island rocks coming to light far out in the main stream -- then many a tributary died and this one cut off from the shallowing trunk moved slowly back, amid the gushing and gurgling of its bleeding rills, until crouching in the dome shadows of this half-mile hollow it lived a feeble separate life. Here its season days come and go and the hiding glacier lives and works. It brings down boulders and sand and dust polishings from its domes, and narrow canons between, a dam is thus made curving around its base, and beneath working in the dark it has scooped a shallow bed. Again there is a change and the glacier retires a few steps farther, when a cluster of equal years again allows it to rest, and it does its last work. Another dam is made like the first, and just where the granite rises in curves to form the upper dome another smooth lake basin is scooped, and soon the last leaving fragments of the glacier die -- its last work accomplished. The twin basins are filled with pure green water and floating

He thinks  
means

broken pieces of snow and ice. The domes perfect in polish and sculpture gleam in new-born purity, lakes and domes reflecting each other, bright as the ice which made them.

God's seasons circle on. Glad brooks born of the snow and rain sing among the shining rocks, and bring sand to the naked lakes and now in this fullness of time comes many a chosen plant, first a lowly carex with dark brown spikes, then taller sedges and rushes fixing a soil. Now grasses flock to the growing meadows, now warmer and dryer back from the water's rim, and many a daisy and blooming shrub, until lake and meadow-rings, growing throughout their season days like flowers in summer, develope to the beauty of today.

How softly comes night to the mountains. Shadows grow upon all the landscape, only the highest peaks of the Hoffman group are bathed in yellow light. Down in this hollow it is twilight, and my two domes, more impressive than in full day, seem to approach me. They are not vast and over-spiritual like Yosemite Tissiack, but comprehensible and companionable and capable of human affinities. The darkness grows and all of their finer sculpture is dim. Now the grand curves and arches fade also, and the whole structure massed in black rises upon the sky.

I have set fire to two pine logs and the neighboring trees are coming to the charmed circle of light. <sup>The</sup> Two-leaved pine with sprays and tassels innumerable, the silver fir with magnificent fronded whorls of shining branches, startlingly distinct, and the graceful nodding spruce dripping with cones, seeming still more spiritual in this campfire light.



Oh! Grandly do my two legs give back their light slow gleaned from a hundred summers, garnered away in doffed cells, and in beads of amber gum. As if to witness this perfect and beautiful death their living companions look down and together with this outgush of light seems to flow all of the other riches of their life, and sweet it is, to lie thus alone in full exposure to their spirit beauty.

Why is night so intensely impressive, is it because of an indefinite bodyless something nothing that we call wildness, wierdness, etc., or is it because of the activity of our own spiritual affinities concentered by the darkness, and made to act with more force upon the spiritual beings about us, and made more susceptible of their influences. To be lonely must be to lose for the time being our spiritual strength. In this civilization of ours most of our spiritual powers are undeveloped like eyes that are never allowed to fill with light. As creatures with veritable carnal bodies dwell by myriads in a drop of water, so the whole earth and every pore and chink of the sky is filled by spiritual creatures, and do they never come to us, have they no human sympathy.

It is midnight, and I must rest. Goodnight. Goodnight also to my two logs, and two lakes, and to my two domes high and black on the sky with a cluster of stars between.

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JOHN MUIR

Yosemite, Cal.---